NUMB. XLII.

The GUARDIAN.

Non missura cutem, nisi plena cruoris Hirudo. Hor.

Wednesday, April 29. 1713.

TOM *Lizard* told us a Story, the other Day, of some Persons which our Family know very well, with so much Humour and Life, that it caused a great deal of Mirth at the Tea-Table. His Brother *Will*, the *Templar*, was highly delighted with it, and the next Day being with some of his Inns-of-Court Acquaintance, resolved (whether out of the Benevolence, or the Pride of his Heart, I will not determine) to entertain them with what he called *a pleasant Humour enough*. I was in great Pain for him, when I heard him begin, and was not at all surprized to find the Company very little moved by it. *Will.* blushed, looked round the Room, and with a forced Laugh, *Faith, Gentlemen*, said he, *I do not know what makes you look so grave; it was an admirable Story when I heard it.*

When I came home I fell into a profound Contemplation upon Story-telling, and as I have nothing so much at Heart as the Good of my Country, I resolved to lay down some Precautions upon this Subject.

I have often thought that a Story-teller is born, as well as a Poet. It is, I think, certain, that some Men have such a peculiar Cast of Mind, that they see things in another Light, than Men of grave Dispositions. Men of a lively Imagination, and a mirthful Temper, will represent things to their Hearers in the same manner as they themselves were affected with them; and whereas serious Spirits might perhaps have been disgusted at the sight of some odd Occurrences in Life; yet the very same Occurrences shall please them in a well-told Story, where the disagreeable Parts of the Images are concealed, and those only which are pleasing exhibited to the Fancy. Story-telling is therefore not an Art, but what we call a *Knack*; it doth not so much subsist upon Wit as upon Humour; and I will add, that it is not perfect without proper Gesticulations of the Body, which naturally attend such merry Emotions of the Mind. I know very well, that a certain Gravity of Countenance sets some Stories off to Advantage, where the Hearer is to be surprized in the End; but this is by no means a general Rule; for it is frequently convenient to aid and assist, by cheerful Looks, and whimsical Agitations. I will go yet further, and affirm that the Success of a Story very often depends upon the Make of the Body, and Formation of the Features of him who relates it. I have been of this Opinion ever since I criticised upon the Chin of *Dick Dewlap*. I very often had the Weakness to repine at the Prosperity of his Conceits, which made him pass for a Wit with the Widow at the Coffee-house, and the ordinary Mechanicks that frequent it; nor could I my self forbear laughing at them most heartily, though upon Examination I thought most of them very flat and insipid. I found, after some time, that the Merit of his Wit was founded upon the shaking of a fat Paunch, and the tossing up of a Pair of Rosie Jowles. Poor *Dick* had a Fit of Sickness, which robbed him of his Fat and his Fame at once; and it was full three Months before he regained his Reputation, which rose in proportion to his Floridity. He is now very jolly and ingenious, and hath a good Constitution for Wit.

Those, who are thus adorned with the Gifts of Nature, are apt to show their Parts with too much Ostentation. I would therefore advise all the Professors of this Art never to tell Stories; but as they seem to grow out of the Subject Matter of the Conversation, or as they serve to illustrate or enliven it. Stories, that are very Common, are generally irksome; but may be aptly introduced, provided they be only hinted at, and mentioned by way of Allusion. Those, that are altogether new, should never be ushered in, without a short and pertinent Character of the chief Persons concerned; because, by that means, you make the Company acquainted with them; and it is a certain Rule, that slight and trivial Accounts of those who are familiar to us, administer more Mirth than the brightest Points of Wit in unknown Characters. A little Circumstance, in the Complexion or Dress of the Man you are talking of, sets his Image before the Hearer, if it be chosen aptly for the Story. Thus, I remember, *Tom Lizard*, after having made his Sisters merry with an Account of a formal old Man's way of Complimenting, owned very frankly, that his Story would not have been worth one Farthing, if he had made the Hat of him whom he represented one Inch narrower. Besides the marking distinct Characters, and selecting pertinent Circumstances, it is likewise necessary to leave off in time, and end smartly. So that there is a kind of Drama in the forming of a Story, and the

(Price Two Pence.)